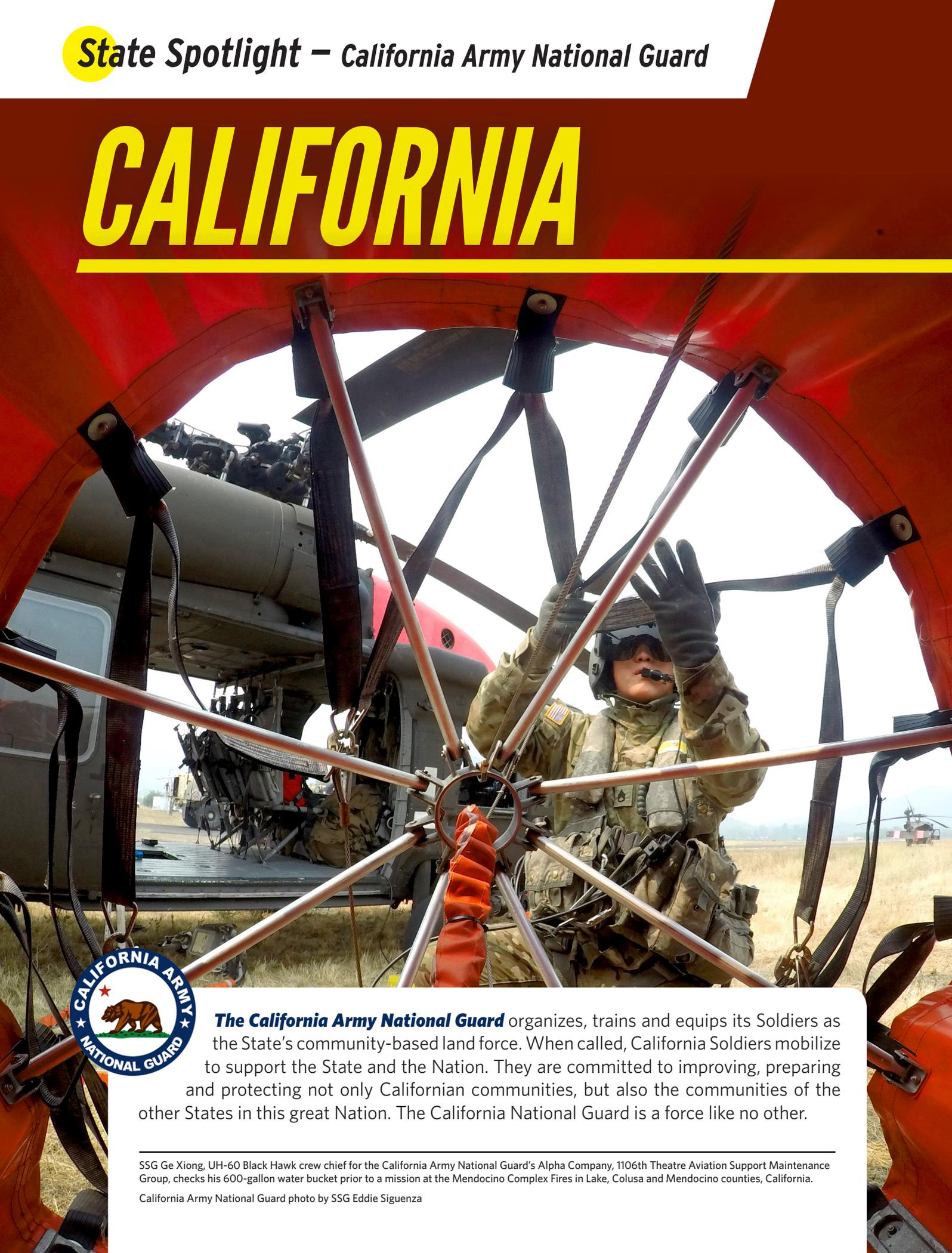


CALIFORNIA



The California Army National Guard organizes, trains and equips its Soldiers as the State's community-based land force. When called, California Soldiers mobilize to support the State and the Nation. They are committed to improving, preparing and protecting not only Californian communities, but also the communities of the other States in this great Nation. The California National Guard is a force like no other.

SSG Ge Xiong, UH-60 Black Hawk crew chief for the California Army National Guard's Alpha Company, 1106th Theatre Aviation Support Maintenance Group, checks his 600-gallon water bucket prior to a mission at the Mendocino Complex Fires in Lake, Colusa and Mendocino counties, California.

California Army National Guard photo by SSG Eddie Siguenza



California National Guard Education Assistance Award Program

The **California National Guard Education Assistance Award Program** (CNG EAAP) issues financial awards to qualifying members of the California Army or Air National Guard and State Military Reserve. The grant can pay up to 100 percent of fees at the University of California, California State University, California Community Colleges and eligible California non-public institutions.

Eligibility:

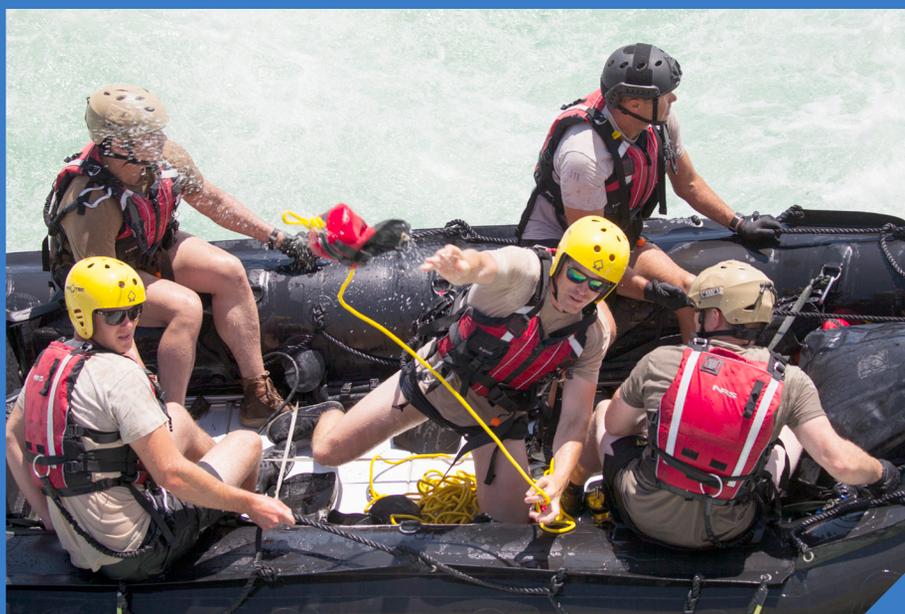
- Must be an active member of, and have served two years in, the California National Guard (CNG) or the State Military Reserve (SMR)
- Must agree to remain an active member in the CNG or the SMR throughout the participation period in the CNG EAAP
- Must agree to use the award to obtain a certificate, degree or diploma that is not currently held
- Must be accepted by, registered at or enrolled in a qualifying institution
- Must maintain enrollment in at least three (3) academic units per term
- Must maintain at least a 2.0 cumulative grade point average (GPA) annually
- Must be a resident of California as determined by the institution (based on resident and non-resident tuition)
- Must not be receiving a CAL Grant award check for the same academic year

For more information on the CNG EAAP, or to apply for an award, go to NationalGuard.csac.ca.gov.

Come Hell or Swiftwater: 5th Battalion, 19th Special Forces Group Soldiers Train for the Worst

STORY AND PHOTOS BY CONTRIBUTING WRITER SrA Crystal Housman

(Soldier first names omitted for security purposes)



When California Army National Guard's CPT Andrew [whose full name is not used due to security protocols] took his Green Beret combat dive team to Blythe, California, for annual training last summer, he had one priority in mind: save lives.

CPT Andrew knew his team's ability to survive during waterborne infiltration missions overseas would increase with specialized swiftwater rescue training. He also knew the team's Special Forces (SF) waterborne operations training and

equipment could be tremendous assets the next time a major hurricane or flood hits California – or anywhere in the world.

All the team needed was a little more training and a little more gear.

"These types of water emergencies happen every year, are happening now, and they will continue to happen," said CPT Andrew, a former U.S. Air Force combat rescue officer who has also worked as a civilian lifeguard on California's beaches. "The key is to be ready to help.

"As an SF team, we don't just go out

California Army National Guard Soldiers of the 5th Battalion, 19th Special Forces Group, train in swiftwater rescue techniques along the Colorado River near Blythe, Calif., as preparation for providing domestic search and rescue capabilities during response efforts to major disasters.

there and hunt bad guys downrange. We have capabilities that when we're homeland we can employ to help others." He pointed out that the Florida National Guard and Mississippi National Guard both field full-time waterborne rescue and recovery teams with their dive-qualified SF Soldiers.

Special Forces Soldiers from the 5th Battalion, California Army National Guard practice rescue techniques along the Colorado River, Calif.





A Soldier of the 5th Battalion, 19th Special Forces Group, California Army National Guard floats behind his team's boat while peering under water with a snorkel as part of swiftwater rescue training.

"They're recognized federally and internationally as the gold standard of validation and accreditation," CPT Andrew said.

Using themselves as "live bait," the Soldiers worked to keep one another from being swept downstream by utilizing rescue boats, boards, float bags and ropes while learning rescue techniques in fast-moving currents near the Palo Verde Dam. The dam is on the Colorado River, which forms the border between California and Arizona.

In one exercise, Soldiers battled currents generated from the dam as they each swam across the river from one State to the other and then back again.

Instructors infused hazard recognition into each aspect of the training, giving MSG Alex, the team's noncommissioned officer in charge, a new respect for river operations.

"You don't know the hidden dangers of swiftwater, specifically to river-type rescues, and all the hidden dangers that lurk below the water's surface," MSG Alex said.

Conflicting currents caused by drop-offs from natural and man-made obstacles such as rocks and dams can be fatal, he said.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) maintains 28 Urban Search and Rescue task forces around the country, including eight in California. Waterborne rescue personnel and teams are included in each task force, and can be requested based on the needs of an incident.

According to the California Governor's Office of Emergency Services (Cal OES), the State deployed urban search teams – including water rescue elements – to help with response efforts for hurricanes Harvey and Irma in 2017 and for hurricanes Florence and Olivia in 2018. In January, the State called upon its water rescue elements to respond when heavy rains triggered a deadly mudslide in the Santa Barbara County.

CPT Andrew's goal for his team – a California Army National Guard Operational Detachment Alpha (ODA) in the 5th Battalion, 19th Special Forces Group (Airborne) – is to integrate into a task force

and be called the next time disaster strikes.

"We go through some of the most difficult dive training in the military," he said. "We're capitalizing on those specialized skills to extend the reach of the California National Guard into any kind of waterborne rescue and recovery mission, be it maritime or riverine or lake."

Last June, CPT Andrew and his Soldiers took to the water and completed the first step toward becoming a fully certified and deployable waterborne disaster response team.

For five days, instructors from Intrepid Maritime, a Rescue 3 International certified instruction company, trained and tested the team.

Special Forces Soldiers of the 5th Battalion, 19th Special Forces Group, dive into the Colorado River, near Blythe, Calif., to rescue a fellow Soldier playing the role of civilian who has been caught adrift in the river.



“The water drops off a little bit, and it creates a washing machine tumbling effect that essentially will suck you down to the bottom,” MSG Alex said. “The first priority is for you the rescuer not to get yourself into a hazard.”

Downed trees and debris also present a hazard to rescue teams. “In the river, especially in a flood, there’s a lot of obstacles in the water that can cause entrapment,” CPT Andrew said. “Once you get entrapped in the river, you’re in a lot of trouble.

“That’s where a lot of the technical components with rescues come in.”

Team members honed their rope skills in varying currents and depths before taking the gear onto their “Zodiac”-style boats. Once aboard, they conducted practice rescues at the base of the dam while battling the area’s strongest currents and most dangerous waters.

Their performance impressed Jeremiah Field, Intrepid Maritime’s lead instructor, who challenged the Soldiers all week with different scenarios to prove their skills.

“They did a great job,” he said. “They jumped right in and adapted quickly.”

Field, who has trained countless fire departments and other rescue teams on the water, said the Soldiers stood out among his students.

“We work with a lot of teams that have been working together for a long time and are well established,” he said, referring to civilian teams of first responders from the

local, State and federal levels. “But these guys, their communication, the way they move together and the way they handle the situation is far and above what any of our other teams do.”

MSG Alex said SF teams are perfectly positioned to perform disaster response work.

“We have a core group of guys, a small ‘A-team,’ that are used to working with each other, self-reliant, won’t quit and can really fight through adversity, especially in a time like a natural disaster,” he said.

By week’s end, each Soldier had completed Swiftwater and Flood Rescue Technician basic and advanced courses to receive certification at each skill level.

Completing the individual certifications is the most difficult and critical component to becoming a deployable asset, Field said. He noted that the team has a few more boxes to check before it can be requested by State emergency managers for activation as a stand-alone asset.

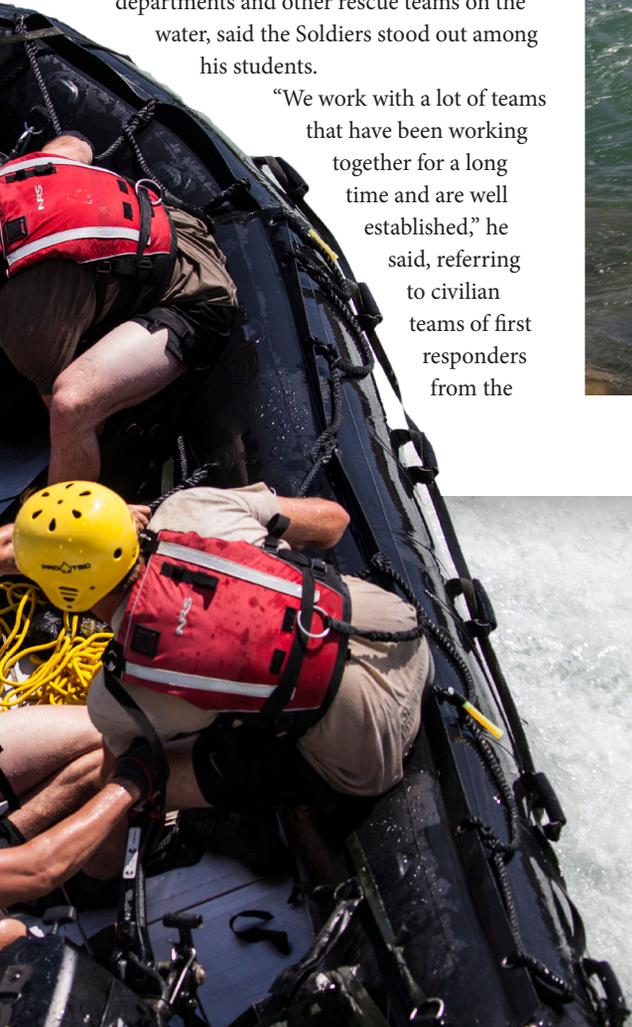
“This is the first step to getting into the water side of urban search and rescue operations,” Field said.

The Soldiers will each need classroom training in the Incident Command System (ICS) to integrate with state and federal task forces at a rescue site. The organizational system is the national foundation for emergency response work and incident management, ensuring agencies can work together and speak the same language.

Each Soldier must also demonstrate land-based search and rescue skills to be officially recognized as a Swiftwater/Flood Search and Rescue Technician in the National Incident Management System (NIMS).

NIMS is the doctrine maintained by FEMA under which all nationwide

California Army National Guard Soldiers of the 5th Battalion, 19th Special Forces Group, maneuver their boat through rapids in the Colorado River while training in swiftwater rescue techniques.



emergency response assets are classified and called for activation. The assets, known as “resources” by the NIMS, include personnel, equipment and teams.

Some NIMS resources, such as a Swiftwater/Flood Search and Rescue Team, are also categorized and credentialed based on a team’s cumulative level of experience, member qualifications, specific capabilities and specific equipment requirements.

There are four levels, or “types,” of NIMS credentialing for Swiftwater/Flood Search and Rescue teams, and the complexity and scope of the missions for which a team can be activated is directly related to its type rating.

According to the NIMS Resource Typing for Mass Search and Rescue Operations, Type 4 Swiftwater/Flood Search and Rescue Team credentialing requires three credentialed technicians, a team leader, a variety of maritime and rescue equipment, and a single boat. Type 4 teams can operate in still water or flood environments; perform first aid, cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) and basic water rescues; and request rope rescues and/or aviation assets, as needed.

Type levels vary from 1 to 4, with Type 1 teams being credentialed to operate in the most complex situations. With Type 3 credentialing, teams move from still water to the more difficult swiftwater and can also operate around hazardous materials or contaminated environments.

The number of personnel and minimum

level of medical capabilities a team can provide increases at each credentialing level, as does the kind of rescues a team can perform. Type 1 teams can perform low angle rope rescues, use technical rope systems and can perform as boat-based support for helicopters conducting water operations.

The equipment required for each type level is effectively the same.

A second boat and the people to operate it – both of which the team already has – are required to increase the team’s NIMS credentialing from a Type 4 resource to Type 1.

Between the boats, wetsuits, scuba gear and other combat equipment that can also be used for domestic operations, CPT Andrew estimates the team already has about \$1 million in gear ready to use.

The specific rescue equipment needed costs a fraction of that – around \$75,000. “That includes live-bait life jackets, special rope rescue systems, dry suits to protect from contaminants, floating rescue helmets and propeller guards for driving their boats in areas with underwater debris,” CPT Andrew said.

Since the team could be called for a rescue anywhere anytime, access to a pair of enclosed trailers and four-wheel drive vehicles is also pertinent, he said, and will help get the team and its gear to a rescue site. NIMS requires a

vehicle and trailer for each boat.

Getting the gear and finishing out the ICS training are important, but those are small hurdles compared with the skills already mastered by the team.

“No other 12-person military element possesses the full spectrum of capabilities that an ODA brings to the table,” CPT Andrew said.

He touts the team’s battalion-level command and control; intelligence and special security capabilities; infrastructure and engineering expertise; satellite communications; trauma and field medicine skills; and specialized infiltration skills by land, sea or air.

“An SF ODA is unmatched in what it can bring to an isolated or austere emergency incident such as a flood or hurricane,” he said.

For CPT Andrew, the team commander, anything is possible. He envisions integrating the team’s swiftwater rescue skills with California National Guard helicopters and airplanes to help save people who are pinned by debris, trapped in vehicles or isolated from conventional emergency response efforts with water raging around them.

“I think putting that muscle behind it, we’re hoping to give California some really good options to employ the National Guard anywhere in the State or around the globe that it’s needed,” he said. ●



A California Army National Guard Special Forces Soldier from the 5th Battalion, 19th Special Forces Group, throws a rope bag to a fellow Soldier in the Colorado River playing the role of civilian caught adrift in the river during the unit’s swiftwater training.



79th IBCT Supports Riverside County Storm Response

BY CONTRIBUTING WRITER

SrA Crystal Housman

As a series of winter storms rolled across Southern California Jan. 14-18, Soldiers from the California Army National Guard's 79th Infantry Brigade Combat Team (IBCT) were activated to support the response by the Riverside County Sheriff's Department.

A dozen Soldiers and five high water vehicles – including troopers and a pair of vehicles from the 1st Squadron, 18th Cavalry Regiment, and three vehicles and crews from the 40th Brigade Support Battalion – deployed Jan. 14 to an incident command post in Lake Elsinore, California. The team provided support throughout the week as authorities braced for potential floods and debris flow in areas ravaged by the Holy Fire last summer.

More than 1,700 homes in the Lake Elsinore area and nearby canyons and foothills fell under mandatory evacuation

orders and another 270 were given voluntary evacuation notices, according to officials with the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE) in Riverside County.

In total, more than 7,000 residents left their homes as the wet weather bore down on the region.

Three storms dropped between 5 and 7 inches of rain in the area, according to the National Weather Service, with Horse Thief Canyon receiving 7.2 inches for the week.

As the bulk of the storm hit Jan. 17, the Soldiers launched four of their trucks to three different staging areas close to where flooding was anticipated. A patrol car followed each truck, and a sheriff's deputy embedded with each vehicle's crew.

Though no further action was needed by the vehicles or crews, they performed the mission admirably.

A pair of light medium tactical vehicles assigned to the 40th Brigade Support Battalion, 79th Infantry Brigade Combat Team, California Army National Guard, stage at an incident command post in Lake Elsinore, Calif., while supporting the Riverside County Sheriff's Department in response to a series of winter storms rolling across Southern California, January 2019.

California Army National Guard photo by
CPT Robert Parry

"Our team did well," said CPT James Moore, who commands the 1-18th rear detachment.

CPT Moore noted that his team worked on a similar mission for Riverside County in December. That experience helped prepare all parties for the January response.

"Because the same flooding happened in the area prior, the population and work crews knew what to do in preparation," CPT Moore said. "The [people with] homes that were going to be affected already left, or they were able to prepare and protect their property by diverting waterflow."

Concerns about debris flow stemmed from landscape scarred by the Holy Fire, which started Aug. 6 in Holy Jim Canyon and burned 23,136 acres in Riverside and Orange counties before it was contained. ●



CALIFORNIA NATIONAL GUARD MILITARY FAMILY RELIEF FUND

The California National Guard Military Family Relief Fund was established to provide short-term financial assistance in the form of grants to eligible members of the California National Guard who are California residents and who have been called to active duty.

Members of the California National Guard may be eligible for financial aid based on the following criteria:

- Current member in good standing of the California National Guard
- Current California resident
- Deployment to active duty for at least 60 consecutive days

For more information or to apply for assistance visit www.CalGuard.ca.gov.

Trust the Gear: Black Hawk Crew Chief Hangs Life on Three Feet of Webbing

STORY AND PHOTOS BY CONTRIBUTING

WRITER SrA Crystal Housman

As flames worked their way up trees in the Feather River Canyon in Northern California last November, SGT Anthony Orduno dangled his boots about 30 feet above the treetops.

SGT Orduno, a UH-60M Black Hawk helicopter crew chief with the California Army National Guard's B Company, 1st Assault Helicopter Battalion, 140th Aviation Regiment, sat broadside on the helicopter's cold gray floor as the chopper circled to drop water on the deadly and highly destructive Camp Fire burning below in Butte County.

One hand held a control to open and close the valve on the helicopter's water bucket, and the other rested easily against a piece of webbing stretched lengthwise across the copter's open doorway. SGT Orduno scanned the smoky horizon for wires and other firefighting aircraft. He looked below to ensure the bucket didn't snag on a tree. All the while, his feet hung outside, dangling in the wind and rotor wash.

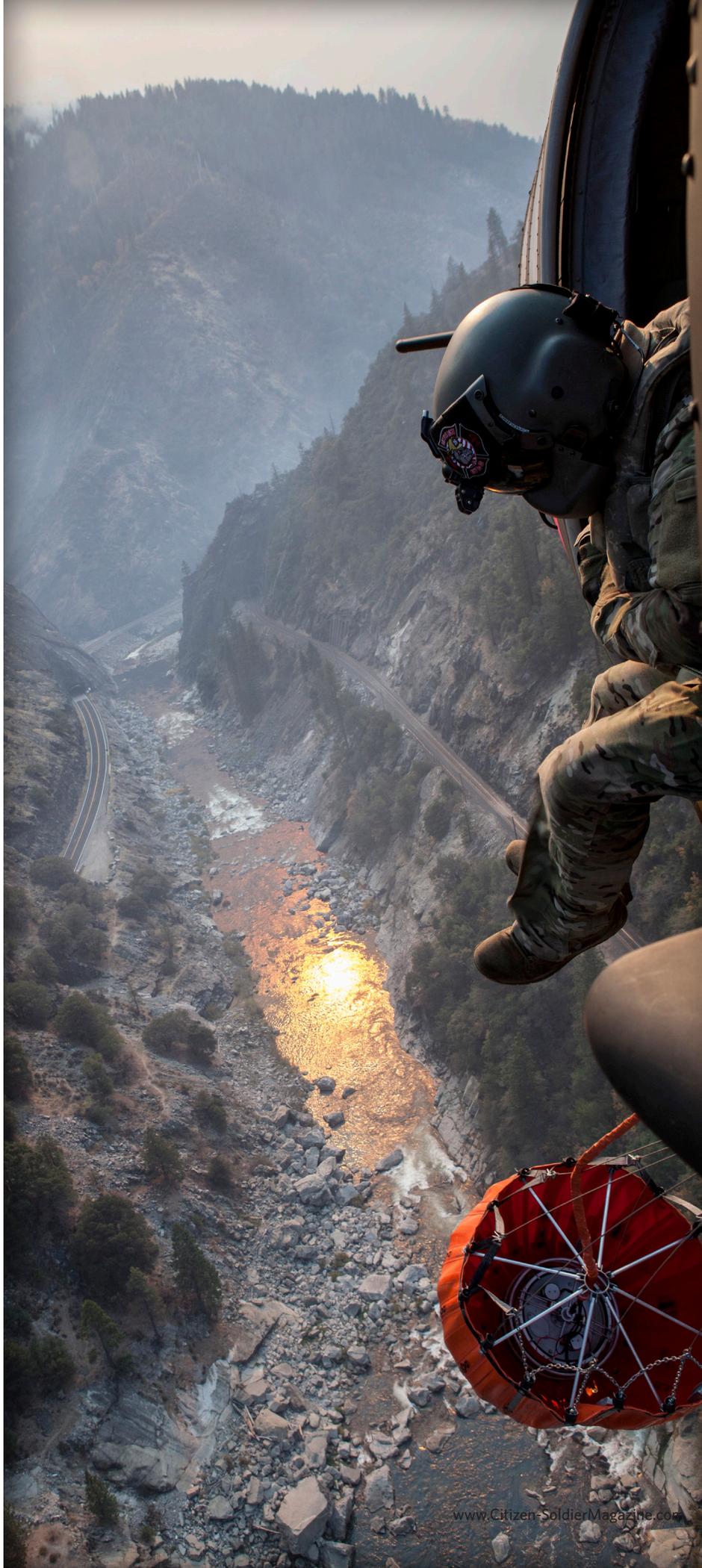
An arm's length of olive drab webbing and a pair of locking carabiners attached his survival vest to a ring that hung from the cabin ceiling.

The webbing-carabiner combo is called a "monkey tail," and it's the only thing keeping SGT Orduno from falling out.

"People I trust tell me it works, so I trust it," SGT Orduno said with a smile.

He recalls crew chief training, and the first time he wore the monkey tail. "My flight instructor told me to just stand at the edge and lean out," he said. "I did it and it held me, so I've trusted it ever since."

SGT Anthony Orduno, a UH-60M Black Hawk helicopter crew chief with Bravo Company, 1st Assault Helicopter Battalion, 140th Aviation Regiment, California Army National Guard, watches as the helicopter's bucket lowers toward the Feather River, while helping contain the Camp Fire in Butte County, California.



In his eighth year as a Black Hawk crew chief, SGT Orduno is at home in the helicopter, moving comfortably about the cabin.

It's testament to his crew, his faith in the bird and in the gear that keeps him inside of it.

As crew chief, he is one of the aircraft's senior mechanics and caretakers. SGT Orduno oversees a staff of Soldiers who service the helicopter after every mission. He makes sure the helicopter's maintenance is completed and all the equipment in the aircraft is secure.

He said he trusts the pilots won't exceed the limitations of the aircraft and that his team of mechanics will do the right things to keep the Black Hawk flying.

"We've just got to trust in what we do and how we do it," SGT Orduno said.

As he and his crew flew through the Camp Fire's heavy smoke and ash, flames worked their way through brush and up the trunks of years-old trees.

An embedded aircrew member from the California Department of Forestry and Fire Prevention (CAL FIRE) coordinated which part of the northern California wildfire the crew would work to contain.

The pilots positioned the aircraft, and in the back SGT Orduno's monkey tail was clipped as he prepared to make a drop. The bucket was carrying almost 660 gallons (or nearly 5,200 pounds) of water the team picked up from the Feather River a couple of minutes earlier.

"It's an amazing feeling to know that I can control the water," SGT Orduno said. "Seeing flames go out with that white smoke coming up, it's a good feeling."

By the time SGT Orduno and his crew were released from the Camp Fire, he would see a lot of white smoke. Despite being grounded for two days due to weather and visibility issues, they would fly for four days and drop more than 37,000 gallons of water on the fire before they headed home to Southern California.

"I love what I do, and I'm glad I can help people who are unfortunate," SGT Orduno said. "If my house was on fire, I'd want somebody to put it out." ●



CW2 Douglas Martine, a helicopter pilot with Bravo Company, 1st Assault Helicopter Battalion, 140th Aviation Regiment, California Army National Guard, flies the first fire mission for the California Army National Guard's new M-model UH-60 Black Hawk helicopters supporting the response to the Camp Fire in the Feather River Canyon in Butte County, Calif.

Smoke billows into the sky as the Camp Fire burns in the Feather River Canyon in Butte County, Calif.

A California Army National Guard UH-60M Black Hawk helicopter assigned to the 1st Assault Helicopter Battalion, 140th Aviation Regiment, California Army National Guard, flies through the smoky Feather River Canyon while helping authorities contain the northeastern edge of the Camp Fire in Butte County, Calif.

California Army National Guard photo by SPC Amy Carle



HELPING CALIFORNIA'S HEROES GET HIRED

Work for Warriors (WFW) is a State and federally funded FREE Job Placement Program in California. The intent of the employment initiative, branded "Work for Warriors," is aimed at assisting post-9/11 Veterans, active National Guard, active Reserve members, spouses and Gold Star Families in finding civilian employment in their region of the State.

WFW began when, in February 2012, Adjutant General of the California National Guard MG David S. Baldwin worked with his staff and Speaker of the Assembly, John A. Perez to tackle the California National Guard unemployment rate. To date, WFW has helped place over 5,000 service members, Veterans and spouses into gainful employment. Additionally, WFW has over 350 business partners throughout the State.

Businesses that want to hire experienced service members can contact a WFW resource manager, who serves as the single point of contact for their employment needs.

Candidate Process

1. Contact WFW.
2. WFW will match candidates with the skills and requirements of the desired open position(s).
3. WFW will critique and develop candidates' resumes.
4. WFW will help with interview preparation.
5. WFW will continue to assist and conduct follow-up throughout the process.

To find out more, or to contact WFW about employment assistance, visit, www.workforwarriors.org, call **(916) 854-4426** or email apply@workforwarriors.org.

Bringing Hope to Butte County, by the Truckload

BY CONTRIBUTING WRITER

SPC Amy Carle

As the Camp Fire raged across the fields and forests of Butte County in Northern California last November, Deborah Damonte sat on her home's tiled roof and watched the flames begin to burn along the edges of her property. She and her husband hadn't been able to evacuate in time, so they remained on their ranch, watching the fire sweep across the landscape and turn the skies black with ash.

"The power line came down across the road, and we couldn't leave, so we stayed," said Damonte, a resident of the community of Paradise. "It was scary when I saw the house across the road go up. You could see in the distance the fire going all around our property."

Damonte and her husband had already lost almost everything in a fire once before. During the 2008 Humboldt Fire siege, they saw their barn, woods, fields and fences all

burn. After the smoke cleared, their adobe home was the only structure still standing. She said they learned some lessons during that fire and believes it helped them survive the fire this time.

"Our house remained, but everything else burned," Damonte said. "When we rebuilt, it was pretty fireproof."

Megan Brown also stayed on her ranch when the Camp Fire evacuation order came. A sixth generation rancher, Brown was ready with a plan, including a mapped-out sequence of locations she could escape to if the flames came too close. Brown was afraid that if she left, she wouldn't be able to get back to her animals – 60 cows and their calves and about 40 of her prized pigs.

"If they don't get fed, things could get ugly," Brown said.

David Johnson, of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Wildlife services in Shasta County, said Brown and Damonte's stories are common. Johnson knows the residents of this area. He carries a ring filled with dozens of keys, all belonging to ranchers who trust him with their homes.

"They trust us to come in when they're not there," Johnson said. "It's a high compliment, and a great responsibility."

Even when the ranchers face devastating, life-threatening situations, Johnson said they

will often decide to stay on their land rather than leave their herds alone and at risk.

"These folks won't leave their animals," Johnson said. "They're family members, and they won't leave them."

Damonte and Brown were both lucky. While the fire torched the areas around them, they and their animals were safe. Damonte watched from her roof as 5 tons of hay turned to ash just steps from her door. The fires also destroyed the flumes that delivered water to Brown's ranch. With roads closed and resources limited, the lack of food and water meant their animals were still at risk.

While their property was out of danger, they now faced a whole new set of challenges – how to provide food and water for their animals with the surrounding infrastructure destroyed.

After 23 days on the go, with nonstop phone calls and interviews, Lisa Almaguer was ready to be with her family. Almaguer, the public information officer for the Butte County Public Health Department, had been working 16-hour days since the fire began. It didn't leave her a lot of time at home.

"The other day, my kids were fighting over who got to stand next to me," she said.

Almaguer traveled across the county, continually providing up-to-date information in a rapidly evolving environment. She

Soldiers from the California Army National Guard's 2632nd Transportation Company unload donated supplies at a cache point in Oroville, California, November 2018, to help residents impacted by the deadly Camp Fire.



embedded at the Incident Command Post and worked with media to ensure residents knew what resources were available to them, and where they could go for help.

As quickly as the evacuations started, Butte County officials began working in joint coordination with other State agencies and organizations, such as the North Valley Animal Disaster Group (NVADG), to respond to residents and ranchers who needed assistance for their animals.

NVADG set up shelters for displaced or rescued animals, and began offering donated supplies and food to residents in need. Teams of volunteers mobilized to feed animals that were sheltered in place and to check on animals after concerned citizens called NVADG's emergency hotline. The USDA sent wilderness specialists from across the State, who helped run water and food to ranchers and farms around the area. It was a massive coordinated effort.

This is when animal rescue experts like Willmer Dyslin jump in. An Army Veteran and former NVADG volunteer, Dyslin has a history of going into flood and fire zones to get things moving smoothly. He took a role as a warehouse manager during the Camp Fire response, but said he offers a broad range of skills.

"They know they can call me," Dyslin said. "They call me in to fix stuff, and I get it fixed."

Dyslin began rolling out 20 tons of feed a day, setting up cache points for owners to pick up supplies and directing drops to locations in and outside of the fire zone.

Still, Almaguer understood the residents of the area were anxious about the condition of their animals. She said she wanted to reassure them that the inter-agency coordination would continue to be highly effective.

"Our field teams are being supported by national agencies that have experience in major disasters," she said. "The animals are safe, and being cared for."

Derek Milsaps, the USDA assistant director for Northern California, also emphasized the strength of the cross-functional effort.

"It's pretty rare, something of this magnitude," Milsaps said. "And we have a unique organization that can work together to respond effectively."

Though the warehouse had previously

been pushing out 20 tons of feed a day, Dyslin said operations slowed down and he was only able to send out 9 tons on Nov. 25, the Sunday after Thanksgiving. He had the supplies to send out more, but it was tough to get tons of hay miles across the mountain in the beds of pickup trucks.

Then, they called in the California Army National Guard.

BIG TRUCKS, BIGGER IMPACT

Soldiers of the 2632nd Transportation Company rolled in to Oroville late on Nov. 25. Based in Sacramento, the unit needed over four hours to move its trucks in. A sundown curfew on the mountain meant it was too late for Soldiers to get started with supply runs that night, but they were ready for action at 7:30 the next morning.

David Johnson, the USDA wilderness specialist, said he saw the impact immediately.

"There was no way we could keep up. First day the guys were here, they moved 90 tons like that," he said, snapping his fingers. "They brought 200 gallons of water at a time. They took the deuce and a half (M35 cargo truck), and it was incredible. They got 30 bales to someone who had 100 goats."

He said the acceleration of supply





California Army National Guard Soldiers from the 2632nd Transportation Company help rancher Megan Brown and USDA wilderness specialists set up a water trough at a ranch outside of Paradise, Calif., during a water transport to residents impacted by the Camp Fire.

Soldiers of the California Army National Guard's 2632nd Transportation Company unload donated supplies at a residential distribution center in Magalia, Calif., as part of a transport of critical supplies across the Butte County area to help residents impacted by the Camp Fire.

distribution had a tremendous impact on the area residents.

"It's been a pleasure to watch the morale," Johnson said. "When you show up, the people realize this can happen. I see them smile for the first time."

Hauling pet food and bucking hay isn't the kind of work the Transportation Company is used to.

"Normally, our mission is transporting infantry and personnel," said SFC Jeffrey M. Hawley, operations NCO and truck master for the 2632nd. "This is something we never thought we'd be doing, but we're doing it."

The unit moved quickly once called, and the unconventional assignment

gave Soldiers an opportunity for a new perspective on the skills they can bring to an emergency response.

"We think about the human impact, not just their livelihood," SFC Hawley said. "It's a good experience to understand the broad perspective."

Platoon leader 2LT Mackenzie Q. Foss had moved to California just a few months earlier from South Dakota. New to the company and the State, Foss had never been mobilized for emergency active duty before. She said she was moved by the experience.

"It just breaks my heart – just seeing the area, the number of people it has affected," she said. "It's really eye opening to see the way

the community pulls together. We're working with civilians and combined forces to help any way we can."

2LT Foss repeated a common sentiment among the crews, remarking about how quickly the operations had come together. She credited the leadership of her team, who, she said, made sure the Soldiers knew what to do, even with the unusual mission.

SFC Hawley agreed. "We've got an awesome team," he said. "We have a lot of senior NCOs who did this work on deployment. Our leadership is unfolding to our junior Soldiers, who are out here learning a lot."

SPC Miguel Costa, a truck driver, said it was a rewarding experience. He's been with the unit since 2015 and participated in fire missions before, but he said he hadn't worked

on an operation quite like this.

"It's good to see civilians helping, and law enforcement," SPC Costa said. "It's great to see a joint task force, and everyone participating. It's good to see the community itself coming out."

SPC Costa said he wasn't surprised by how quickly the coordinated effort came together. "My team is on it," he said. "No matter if it's last minute, we always get rolling right on the spot."

DELIVERING HELP, OFFERING HOPE

As soon as the evacuation order came in, Tina Rickert was ready to move. She loaded her truck with her family and two rescue dogs, but before she headed out of town, she stopped at her elderly neighbor's house to check on him.

"We pounded on the door until he answered," she said. "We told him we have to go right NOW. He had no idea. He hadn't even heard [about the evacuation]."

The neighbor grabbed his dog and joined Rickert, along with her mother, her husband, their adult daughter and two dogs. As the fire swept across the mountain, they drove 4½ hours through crowded backcountry roads to a safe shelter at a neighborhood church.

"We all made it down together," Rickert

said.

Before she was even allowed to return home, Rickert, a Veteran of the Air National Guard, was already looking for ways to help her community heal. She jumped immediately into wildlife and animal rescue efforts.

But after two weeks in the heart of the fire zone, she started to feel the effects of smoke exposure in her throat and lungs. She knew she needed to take care of herself, but felt she couldn't just walk away.

Willmer Dyslin understood how she felt and came up with an idea that would allow her to take care of her health and still be part of the action. Rickert's home was only a few minutes outside the evacuation zone and easily accessible to residents both in and outside the zone.

"I was talking to Will, and he said, 'If you really want to help, what about putting a feed store at your house?'" Rickert said. "I didn't want to come home at all, but this was a way to keep serving the community."

Only a few hours after the 2632nd started work, Soldiers had already made their second visit to Rickert's house, successfully converting it to a feed center. As the day dimmed into twilight, the Soldiers filled Rickert's garage with pet food and kitty litter,

and loaded bales of hay onto pallets. Before the sun set, Rickert would have nearly 5 tons of supplies stacked neatly at her home, waiting for anyone in need.

On Megan Brown's ranch, the cattle troughs were empty. Even though storms threatened to flood the area, there was little standing water for them to drink, and more cattle were on the way. When the Soldiers arrived with water tanks, Brown was overwhelmed.

"They just pulled up, and it was magical," she said. "They are saving our lives right now. This means so much to me and to the community."

David Johnson and his colleague at the USDA, Scott Esplin, got to work filling the giant water troughs. Johnson pulled a 100-gallon water container from the bed of his pickup and gave it to Brown. The tank fit neatly on the back of her UTV, and would allow her to carry water to her animals all across the ranch.

"Do you see that?" Brown asked, her voice

California National Guard Soldiers from the 2632nd Transportation Company help Scott Esplin, of the USDA Veterinary Services, fill a water trough at a ranch outside of Paradise, Calif., as part of a water transport to residents impacted by the Camp Fire.



cracking with emotion. “That’s life changing. A little thing like that ... I’m gonna cry.”

At Criswell Ranch, Deborah Damonte gave Soldiers an impromptu lesson in basic farm skills. Damonte expertly stabbed a bale with two hooks, and showed the Guard Soldiers how to properly carry and stack the hay they’d loaded into their trucks that morning.

“That’s called bucking hay,” she told the Soldiers, her face breaking into a smile.

In addition to her own sheep, goats and cattle, Damonte was also housing horses for some of her neighbors. Her eyes lit up as she watched the feed shed fill. She had struggled to get down to the pickup points, and was limited in how much she could carry back.

“It’s hard to get down and pick everything up when you’re going through five bales of hay a day,” Damonte said. “It’s great that they’re here providing this service.”

The county was already working to reach all the ranchers and residents, but the partnership with the National Guard allowed the teams to increase the momentum of their efforts by covering additional areas and making larger drops quickly.

Observing firsthand their impact on the community has been meaningful to the Soldiers. At each location they’ve visited,

residents tell them the work they are doing is changing lives.

“As the teams are going in, the people are grateful,” SFC Hawley said. “We get a lot of positive feedback from the people affected.”

Johnson put it more plainly. “These guys are A-No. 1 in my book,” he said. “These people need help, and these guys are providing it.”

As the Soldiers unloaded the last of the supplies at Rickert’s house, she opened the gate to let her dogs run out to greet them. The dogs, Bella and Buddy, wiggled excitedly. Rickert wanted to get a picture with Soldiers before they left.

“I miss my military family,” she said, smiling as the Soldiers bent down to play with the dogs.

After she and her family evacuated, they learned that the home of Rickert’s mother, the first house she had ever purchased, burned in the fires. She had moved to Magalia only months before. Though Rickert’s home was spared, she lost her business, a soap company that supplied products to stores across the mountain.

While she focuses on running the donation center, Rickert is also trying to figure out how to rebuild her life. A former land planner and environmental coordinator,

she feels like she may be able to help her community rebuild.

“When all of this happened, I thought, ‘I have so many skills I could put to use in my community,’” she said. “So, I’m working on that.” She paused, watching the Soldiers unload the last of the donated supplies. “So many people are working to make it a better place.”

Rickert said her mother, like many others, was reluctant to return to the area. Even after the fire was contained, many residents did not return to areas that had been opened for repopulation. Talking about her community, Rickert teared up for the first time.

“Don’t lose hope,” she said, wiping her eyes. “As a community, it’s all we have.”

Rickert is not alone in her sentiment. The residents of Butte County are invested in moving forward.

Just like when she rebuilt her ranch 10 years ago, Deborah Damonte said she strongly believes the community will come back together in the aftermath of the Camp Fire.

“I love Paradise,” she said. “It will be back. It will be Paradise again.” ●



California Soldiers from the 2632nd Transportation Company pause their work to greet rancher Megan Brown’s dogs at her ranch outside of Paradise, Calif.